

Parenting Years: Cyber Fears

As the holidays approach, visions of laptops and iPhones dance in our children's heads. Unfortunately, these visions are not as benign as the sugar plums which children used to dream about. According to Scott Driscoll, an expert on internet safety, today's instant communication opens up an exciting world to users, but is also fraught with danger. Last month, Driscoll met with both students and parents and shared information about the main areas of concern:

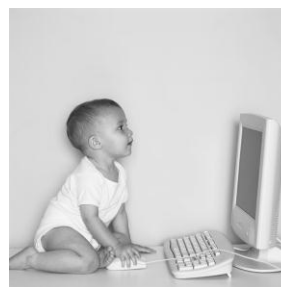
- **Email** – Contrary to popular belief, email is not secure. It is not anonymous and can be easily tracked. Users must make sure they know who they're talking to and that their message is clear. Children need to be reminded that when they use any form of electronic communication they must be careful about their content and comments.

- **Chat Rooms** – According to Driscoll **no one** under the age of 18 should be in a chat room. As he explains it, the purpose of a chat room is to talk to strangers. These strangers often prey on children and may ask for age, sex, and location. Driscoll noted that "No matter what the topic, it goes to sex." Chat rooms like "Chat Avenue" have been set up for children as young as 6!

- **Safety Gambling** – These sites involve a form of chat roulette, where participants are matched with strangers. Sites like Ouvoo and Stickcam offer this communication, which deteriorates to "sextortion."

Peer-to-peer Networking – Using software like Frostwire, kids can share folders, which can introduce viruses, key-logging, spyware, thus making private information available. These include "free" music and sharing sites like *Emule*, *imesh10*, and *Shareaza*.

- **Geo-mapping** – This service shows where you are at the time you've have sent a message. This can end up giving your location information to strangers, by working through mobile devices which are GPS enabled.
- **Social Networking** – Social networking sites are a boon for families and friends who want to keep in touch. However, they represent a danger for kids. Driscoll noted that one internet criminal called these sites "a predator's dream." For example, while the required age for enrollment on these sites is 13, the average age of participants is 38.



(ClipArt)

While kids appear very grown up in middle school, they are easy prey for the predators who stalk the internet.

Other concerns center on the students' own behavior and choices while using the internet. Many students misuse the internet and may engage in **sexting** or **cyber-bullying**.

Following some simple guidelines can help keep kids safe:

- Make sure kids *know* their "friends"
- Never share a password with anyone but a parent or guardian
- Keep the computer in a common area
- Check browser history (Ctrl H) and follow their tweets and postings.